

Evaluation of the Sustainable Uses for Biological Resources (SUBIR) Project—Executive Summary

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Project background

Ecuador is among the most physically and biologically diverse countries in the world, made famous by the nineteenth-century writings of Darwin and von Humboldt. The SUBIR project encompasses an array of more than a dozen major ecosystems. The people who use the resources of the SUBIR project area are culturally and ethnically diverse as well. Of great concern to SUBIR are the competing and often destructive uses of fragile ecosystems in the project area. For millennia relatively stable populations have modified the landscape but have not markedly changed it. This relatively stable relation between peoples and the land is changing rapidly as

- the people of the area become aculturated and increase their market orientation,
- settlers from higher and dryer environments aggressively occupy and deforest lands little suited for agriculture and grazing,
- timber exploitation that devalues the forest by the highly selective removal of only a few valuable trees is followed by abandonment and invasion by settlers following logging roads, and
- petroleum exploration and exploitation contributes indirectly to deforestation by opening areas to deforestation.

Goal and purpose of the SUBIR Project

The Project *goal* is to contribute to the conservation and management of Ecuador's renewable natural resources for sustained economic development.

The Project *purpose* is to identify, test, and develop *in the field* ecologically and socially sustainable resource management models in selected protected areas and their buffer zones to preserve biodiversity and improve the economic well-being of local communities through their participation in the management of natural resources.

SUBIR's goal and purpose are congruent with USAID/Ecuador's Strategic Objective No. 4, to "Promote the Sustainable Use of Natural Resources, the Conservation of Biological Diversity, and the Control of Pollution."

The Project was designed and implemented using USAID's collaborative assistance mode by a consortium of CARE International/Ecuador (the lead entity), the Nature Conservancy, and the Wildlife Conservation Society. These United States-based nonprofit organizations are expected to provide matching cash or in-kind services equal to approximately 25 percent of the \$4.8 million USAID grant. The counterpart organization is the Ministry of Agriculture's Forest, Natural Areas and Fauna Institute (INEFAN). In keeping with the SUBIR focus on local-level participation, over two hundred nonprofit, indigenous and community organizations were consulted, though not directly involved, during project design.

The geographic focus of the project is the land encompassing three major protected areas, the Cotacachi-Cayapas Ecological Reserve, the Cayambe-Coca Ecological Reserve, and the Yasuní National Park in northern Ecuador. The area of concern stretches from tidewater on the Pacific across the Andes into the Amazon basin, a distance of almost 500 kilometers.

SUBIR has progressed toward achieving the Project's purpose by grasping an *opportunity*, established communities' appreciation of their natural resource base and their willingness improve the management of those resources. The Project has strengthened second-level organizations, communities, and selected nongovernmental organizations in activities focused on resource uses that are sustainable and profitable, including forestry, ecotourism, and agriculture. Also addressed have been *constraints* on achieving the Project's purpose such as resource and land tenure uncertainty, lack of controls, or incentives affecting timber and petroleum extraction, and the Government of Ecuador's lack of institutional capacity and commitment to sustainable resource management and the conservation of biological diversity.

Purpose of the evaluation

The SUBIR Project was designed and approved for ten years with an initial authorization for six years. The Project design stipulates specific goals to be accomplished during the first stage, Phase I, prior to amendment of the Cooperative Agreement for Phases II and III. This evaluation comes at the end of the three-year Phase I of the SUBIR Project.

The evaluation has measured progress toward achieving the objectives set forth in the Project Paper and progress toward meeting Mission Strategic Objective No. 4. Extensive recommendations are made to improve Project management and for more efficient use of Project resources to achieve technical objectives.

Findings and conclusions

Accomplishments

Accomplishments of the Project are measured for the two-year period since March

1992. Various substantial results have been achieved and initiatives launched with a high probability of future success. The positive results must be analyzed, built upon, and further refined or stimulated. Among the many achievements and successes of SUBIR, the evaluation team finds the following especially noteworthy.

SUBIR sustainability, research, and training.—With SUBIR's help, Ecociencia has become Ecuador's premier biological research and training institution capable of supporting not only Phase II of SUBIR but similar initiatives elsewhere. SUBIR/Ecociencia research has yielded considerable baseline data on the biological resources of many of the Project sites and has served as a fertile training ground for both scientists and community “parabiologists.”

Grassroots democracy, development, and conservation.—The paralegal program trains and assists local people in community laws and legal advocacy on issues such as land titling and natural resource access rights. SUBIR is strengthening second-level organizations to test and extend sustainable uses of biological resources. “Guardaparques comunitarios” bolster a weakened park protection system with assistance from SUBIR and second-level organizations.

Development-environment dialogue.—SUBIR has made significant strides in opening channels of communication between environmental groups and natural resources related industries, particularly with Endesa/Botrosa in timber and Maxus in oil exploration. These established linkages, combined with SUBIR field efforts, demonstrate promise for influencing the improved management of resources by private-sector entities and affecting the overall policy environment.

Conservation of biological diversity.—The geographical focus of the Project is particularly conducive to the conservation of ecosystem diversity. SUBIR has focused on three protected areas and their buffer zones that efficiently encompass an array of more than a dozen distinct ecosystems from Pacific mangroves through cloud forests, páramos, and the forests of the Amazon.

Significant problem areas

Serious problems identified by the evaluation team must be rectified or well on the way to resolution before authorization to embark on Phase II of the SUBIR Project. Solving these problems will require a major investment of time and changes in SUBIR structure and operations.

Consortium Executive Committee.—The arrangement whereby the Consortium Executive Committee undertook project management oversight and policy guidance has proved unworkable due to duplication of administrative processes and delays in

making and implementing critical decisions. In essence the project is functioning with two boards of directors, since the Project Implementation Committee and the Consortium Executive Committee have come to play virtually the same role, even though the Project Implementation Committee was created to play a more substantive role than the Consortium Executive Committee. This has led to confusion, delays, and a loss of efficiency in the management of the SUBIR project. Legitimate Project management interventions by USAID/Ecuador have been frustrated.

Management conflict.—CARE is the lead, and legally responsible, institution and is attempting to systematize all aspects of Project management and administration. Some members of the Consortium not in agreement with CARE policies prefer to handle hiring and salary issues separately. The SUBIR Project Coordinator at times received directions from the Consortium Executive Committee, USAID, and CARE/ Ecuador. These different chains of authority have led to management frustration, created confused signals, and contributed to high turnover from the coordinator down through the Project field staff.

Scattered efforts.—The most recently available USAID Project Status Report (Apr. 1–Sept. 30, 1993) reports that SUBIR was carrying out more than 300 activities at the time. This number was subsequently scaled back, but draft 1994 work plans still reflect an overburden of disparate activities in scattered sites. This is a highly unrealistic appreciation of the geographic spread and logistic difficulties of simultaneously initiating activities in three major protected areas.

Monitoring and evaluation.—At present the integrated analysis of Project activities is essentially nonexistent. Staff have some inherent sense of what has and has not worked and why, but there is no systematized way of accessing data about Project activities, comparing them within and between the three Project areas, documenting them and making that information available to interested parties in Ecuador and elsewhere. In short, SUBIR is not yet able to function as the “learning institution” it was intended to be in the Project Paper. After nearly three years of implementation, SUBIR still has no functioning monitoring and evaluation system.

Recommendations

Consortium Executive Committee.—Reconfirm the role of CARE/Ecuador as the lead organization responsible for the management and implementation of the SUBIR Project and do away with the present system wherein the Consortium Executive Committee has management oversight. CARE/Ecuador would sign subcontracting agreements with both international and national nongovernmental organizations and institutions with requisite technical skills to ensure successful implementation of the SUBIR Project. CARE/Ecuador would need to ensure that an open dialogue is

maintained with all participating institutions in order to receive the benefit of their experience when policy and implementation issues are addressed.

The Project Advisory Committee.—Actively seek to strengthen the Project Implementation Committee in order to promote substantive Ecuadorian participation in the implementation of the Project. The Project Implementation Committee should function as an advisory committee to CARE/Ecuador and USAID/Ecuador. Given this advisory role, it is recommended that the name of the *Project Implementation Committee* be changed to *Project Advisory Committee*. The committee should meet regularly, offering an ideal forum for policy discussions among the members and afford USAID the opportunity to introduce policy initiatives in a framework involving participation by the national nongovernmental organization community, the Government of Ecuador, and the international nongovernmental organizations.

Geographic integration.—Given the ecological importance of the three protected areas, investments to date in the three areas, and the importance of the Project's presence in establishing protection for the reserves, SUBIR should continue to work in Cotacachi-Cayapas Ecological Reserve, Cayambe-Coca Ecological Reserve, and Yasuní National Park. The breadth of activities programmed for each area should be scaled down significantly and efforts concentrated. Attention needs to be given to identifying, protecting, and restoring the critical processes and systems that ecologically link these reserves.

Topical integration.—During redesign, initial benchmarks must be seriously revised downward. The wide diversity of activities needs to be critically reexamined and clear criteria set for determining what array of activity types should or should not be undertaken. Whatever activity types are retained, these *must* be intimately integrated across components. Field teams should be relocated so as to spend most of their time living in communities of participating second-level organizations, retaining only a skeleton staff at each of the present four field offices of SUBIR.

Critical review.—SUBIR must implement a comprehensive, tightly structured, and highly critical analysis of all activities to date, documenting its findings and nascent models. The process will require at least two months of careful effort and highly qualified outside expertise to guide and facilitate it. This analytic effort must be detailed with evaluation instruments applied to Project activities and to staff review.

Monitoring and evaluation.—At the same time that staff are engaging in the review outlined above, they must establish and test a serious and comprehensive management information and monitoring evaluation system with data provided through the critical review. The information generated through the above exercises must feed into a systematic *strategic planning effort*. Approval of Phase II should depend on SUBIR's

successful completion of these monitoring and evaluation activities.

Policy initiatives.—The policy component of a project like SUBIR must be designed from the ground up, determining first if people in rural areas are affected by existing policies in efforts to improve their well-being and manage natural resources. These efforts set the stage and define the agenda for national-level analyses and dialogue. This sequence of steps should lead to the most appropriate policy and regulatory reforms.

Sustainability.—As part of this strategic effort SUBIR needs to focus on the sustainability of its activities. The Project needs to work with and through a select number of nongovernmental organizations, the nongovernmental umbrella group Comité Ecuatoriano para la Defensa del Medio Ambiente (CEDENMA), large and vocal second-level organizations, and perhaps an enlightened tourism sector to ensure a high level of Ecuadorian participation that can result in future takeover of activities that SUBIR is currently promoting and implementing. Phase II should provide the springboard for greater Ecuadorian participation and management control over specific aspects of SUBIR. SUBIR needs to emphasize the development of economically sustainable activities that ensure a flow of income to rural communities on the periphery of protected areas. This will reduce their dependence on protected area resources and provide a more auspicious climate for fostering a conservation ethic.

Lessons learned

Conflicting priorities.—The involvement of multiple international nongovernmental organizations in Project design and implementation must be evaluated very carefully. Summing up the different concerns and interests of the individual nongovernmental organizations does not necessarily equal the best possible project, either at the design or implementation stage.

National participation.—Not involving local nongovernmental organizations and other relevant stakeholders in Project design and implementation causes friction and limits local support for Project objectives.

Clear expectations.—Mutual expectations and obligations for counterpart agencies and other critically involved institutional participants should be made clear at the outset.

Management structure.—Project management and governance structure is critical, especially when a number of different entities are involved in Project design and implementation. The management structure must encourage full technical participation while avoiding conflictive lines of authority.

Stakeholder involvement.—The use of natural resources involves an array of potentially conflictive actors including conservationists, colonists, indigenous peoples, miners, and loggers. Development agencies and nongovernmental organizations must promote dialogue among the various interest groups, recognizing their legitimate interests if sustainable use is to be approximated.

Focus and concentration.—Effective model building and testing of integrated approaches to use of natural resources can best occur when focused on a limited but representative geographic area where impacts can be monitored and analyzed.

Broad action implications

The greatest diversity of ecosystems and species often occurs in countries where conservation of biodiversity has a low priority. Even if the priority were higher, the financial resources and trained professionals are not adequate to carry out programs on the scale needed. The implication of this reality for USAID in Ecuador, and for all organizations capable of marshaling resources for biodiversity conservation, is that SUBIR-like projects will be needed on an expanded scale with multidonor support for many years. This support needs to be complemented by strong programs that promote greater economic well-being among rural populations, stable population, and universal environmental awareness.